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Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

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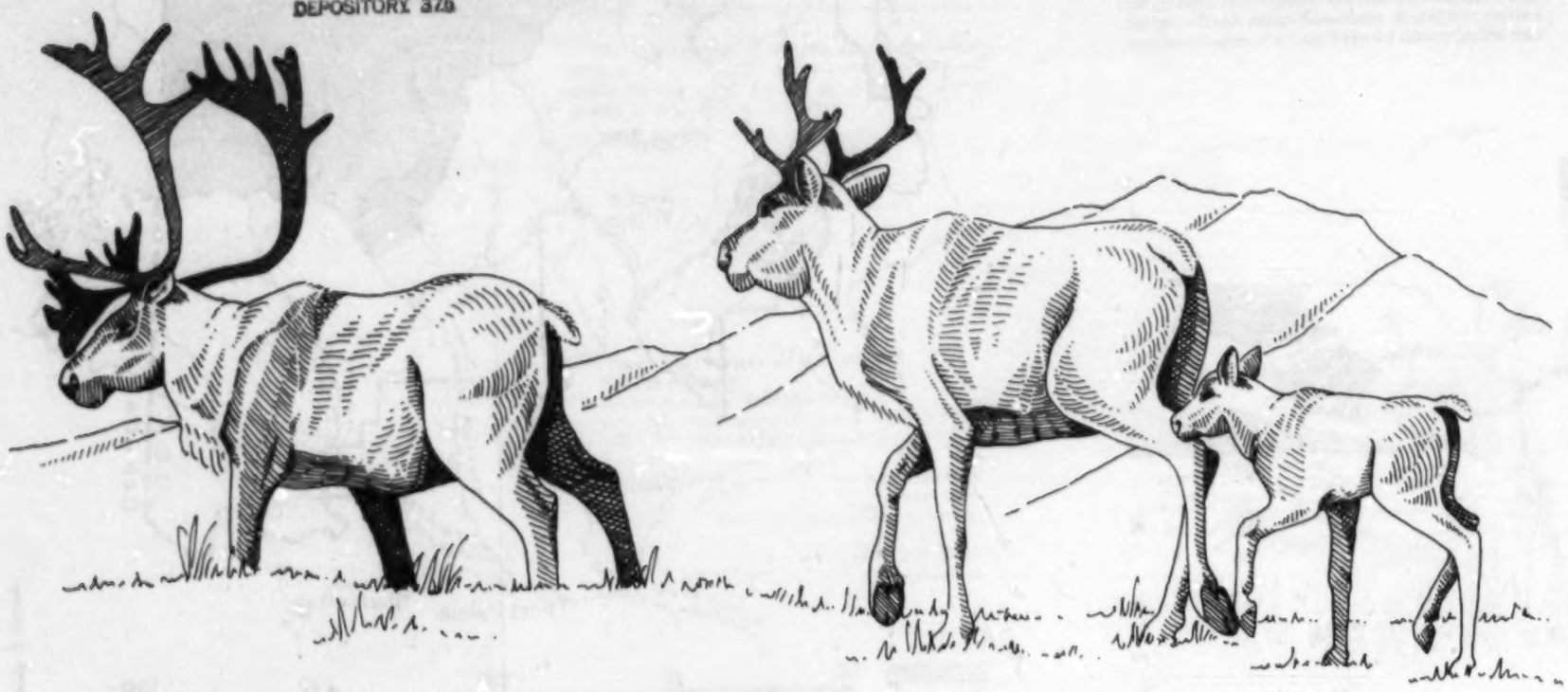
"The Arctic has a call that is compelling. The distant mountains make one want to go on and on over the next ridge and over the one beyond. The call is that of a wilderness known only to a few . . . This last American wilderness must remain sacrosanct."

Justice William O. Douglas, 1960

Originally established in 1960, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was redesignated and expanded by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in December 1980. The primary purpose of the Refuge, now 7.3 million hectares (18 million acres), is to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity. Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, national wildlife refuges are an important system of lands and waters managed and preserved primarily for wildlife and wildlife habitat.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the most northerly unit in the National Wildlife Refuge System and contains an undisturbed portion of the arctic environment large enough to be biologically self-sufficient. It has unique scenic, wilderness, wildlife, and ecological values not found elsewhere in our country. Nowhere else in North America is the transition of biotic communities from the coastal plain to the adjacent mountains so abrupt. Signs of modern man are few, providing opportunities for true wilderness experiences. Entire plant and animal communities are left undisturbed to carry out their natural life cycles.



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The rugged chain of spectacular peaks comprising the Brooks Range curves through the Refuge forming a continental divide through northern Alaska. Deep colorful valleys reach far within the mountains to the base of glaciated peaks, the highest in the Brooks Range. Uplifted east to west, the northern slope descends in a tundra covered plain to the Arctic Ocean. This treeless expanse, covered with grasses, sedges, lichens and other low plants, is cut by braided streams flowing into the sea. A narrow reef of gravel protects much of the shoreline from the Arctic ice pack. In the south-sloping valleys of the Brooks Range, rivers wind serpentine courses through valley floors dotted with lakes, sloughs and wetlands. Groves of stunted white spruce and balsam poplars stand among meadows and muskeg, and grade into dense, taller spruce forests farther south.

Winter in the Arctic Refuge is long and severe. Summer is brief and intense. Arctic adapted plants survive even though permafrost lies half a meter beneath the surface and snow normally covers the ground nine months of the year. Continuous summer sunlight produces extremely rapid leaf growth in June and July, although the annual growth of trees and shrubs is slight. It may take 300 years for a typical white spruce at tree-limit to attain a diameter of 10 centimeters, and man-sized willow shrubs may be 50-100 years old. The result is an extremely fragile ecosystem easily disrupted by man's activities.

Wildlife in the arctic need vast areas to ensure their survival. The Porcupine caribou herd, numbering about 110,000 animals, migrates from wintering grounds in Canada to calving grounds on the northern coastal plain of the Yukon Territory and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Caribou follow natural migration paths, generally along river valleys, on their way to the coast and wintering grounds on the southern slopes of the Brooks Range and south of the Porcupine River in the Yukon. Their seasonal migrations may cover over a thousand miles each year.

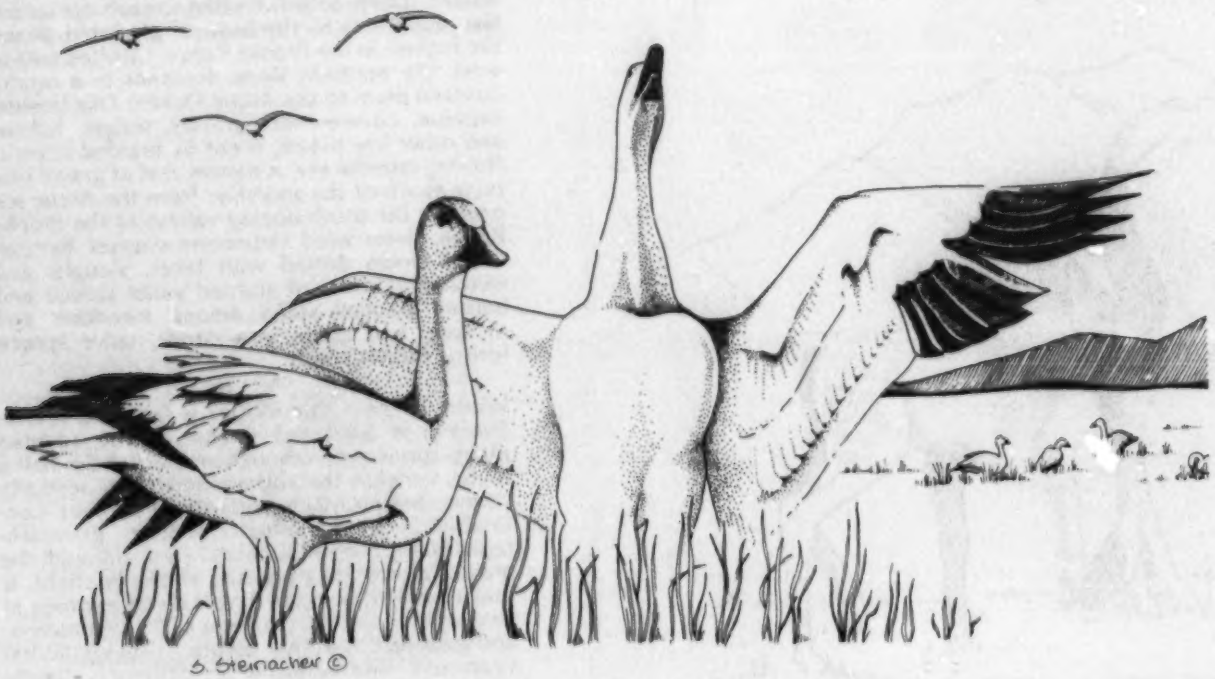
Dall sheep are often seen as white specks resting or moving along the mountainsides. Moose, most common in the southern portions of the Refuge, are found primarily among the willow thickets in river bottoms and near small lakes. Muskox roam the coastal plain. Having disappeared from the north slope in the mid-1800's, largely due to overharvesting, muskox were reintroduced in 1969 from Nunivak National Wildlife Refuge. The transplant was a success, and the herd is increasing in size. Brown (grizzly) bears are widely distributed but are found most commonly in mountain valleys. An important part of the arctic ecosystem, grizzlies wander the tundra meadows and river bottoms searching for ground squirrels, carrion, roots and berries.

Marine mammals of the Arctic Ocean utilize the coastal areas of the Refuge. Some female polar bears den on land during the winter, returning to the polar ice pack in early spring. Ringed seals, a vital source of food for the polar bear, are most numerous in lagoons and offshore waters. Beluga and bowhead whales migrate eastward through the coastal waters of the Refuge in spring and westward again in the fall. Native people of the village of Kaktovik depend partially on bowhead whales for food.

Other mammals found on the Refuge include several species of lemmings, voles and shrews which are food sources for predators including wolves, weasels, wolverines and foxes. Lynx, marten, and snowshoe hares are found in more forested areas.

The Arctic Refuge provides important breeding and staging areas for a myrid of birdlife. Snowy owls and jaegers cruise low over the inland tundra looking for lemmings to feed their hungry young. Cliffs hold the aeries of raptors such as golden eagles, rough-legged hawks, gyrfalcons, and arctic peregrine falcons. The peregrine is an endangered species and requires special attention and protection. In June and July, shorebirds, loons, and waterfowl use coastal tundra wetlands for breeding and nesting. In July and August, birds concentrate in the lagoons and estuaries before migrating south. Thousands of oldsquaw ducks and snow geese rest and feed to gain strength for their southward journey. By mid-September, most bird species have left the coast and will disperse through major continental flyways to wintering grounds spread from North America to South America, Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific. North of the Brooks Range only the ptarmigan, raven, snowy owl, dipper and gyrfalcon remain to spend the winter in the long arctic night.

Each living thing in the arctic has a precarious existence. While allowing ongoing human activities to continue, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge provides an area where natural processes can respond to natural forces. Sustaining the variety, richness, and wilderness of the arctic can only benefit present and future generations.



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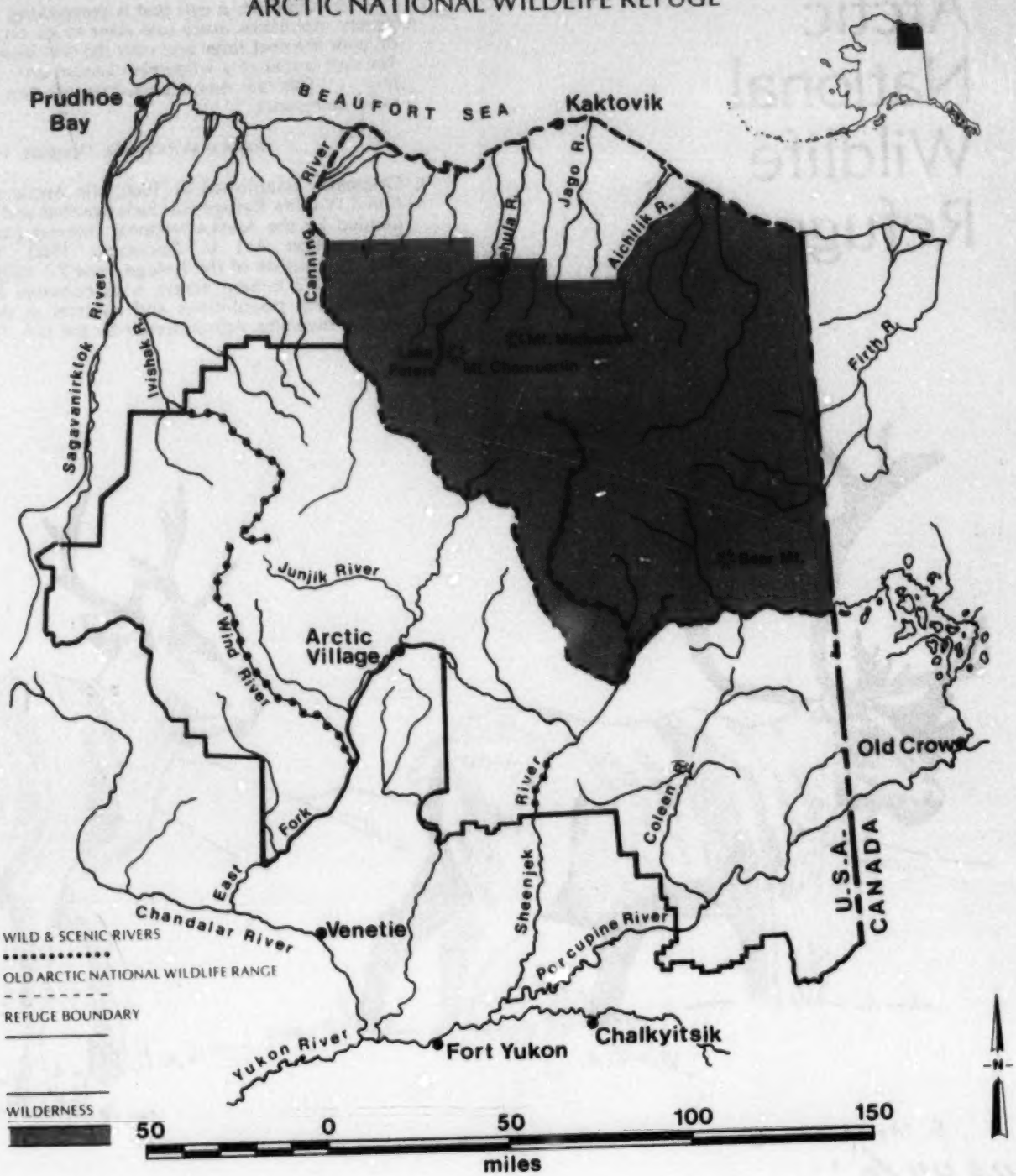
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Firth R.
Junjik River
Arctic Village
Wind River
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The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States — now and in the future.

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